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## A Dark Supper: Borowski's Repetitive Use of the Word Darkness and its Meaning in "The Supper"

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# A Dark Supper: Borowski's Repetitive Use of the Word Darkness and its Meaning in "The Supper"

## **Writing Process**

My writing process focused on developing a functional literary analysis of a short story in the novel, "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen." I chose the short story titled "The Supper" because I felt I had a great understanding of what the writer was representing with his language. Our instructor provided us with a "Methodology" assignment in a previous class, in order to teach us to look for certain trends and patterns in language that the writer subtly places. Such trends and patterns include: repetitions, binaries, and strands. We were asked to write these trends and patterns down, and tally how many of each was present. If a certain word was repeated several times or common themes were prevalent throughout the story, then it was viewed as significant, rather than just a coincidence. So, I used this same process during my preparation for my final writing assignment. I discovered that a certain word was repeated multiple times and sought the meaning behind this in relation to the context of the story. Another tool our instructor provided for us was a draft she had devised some time ago. It was on a short story in the same novel we were using and its purpose was the same as our assignment. I used her draft as a model for mine. I devised a total of four drafts. The first was peer edited and the final three were revised by my instructor.

## **Course**

ENG100

## **Semester**

Spring

## **Instructor**

Prof. Nicole Butler

## **Year**

2014

Michael Wagner

English 100 Literary Analysis

Prof. Nicole Butler

Spring 2014

### A Dark Supper:

#### Borowski's Repetitive Use of the Word 'Darkness' and its Meaning in "The Supper"

In the short story "The Supper" by Tadeusz Borowski, a repetitive use of darkness is used several times to describe the evil, hatred, and hopelessness the people imprisoned by the Nazis experienced. This repetition is more than just a simple description of the time of day for effect or setting - rather, it is a metaphor for the despair and seemingly endless suffering the prisoners faced, and it invites the reader to perceive darkness in a way that focuses on such an evil that it engulfed everything and everyone involved.

Borowski's narrator remains anonymous throughout the story but seems to be a bystander watching the events taking place. However, the narrator is very much a member of the group involved because the narrator's descriptions are vivid. The initial use of the word darkness is in the first sentence of the short story. The narrator describes the situation with a sense of anticipation by saying, "We waited patiently for the darkness to fall," giving the reader an image of the sunlight fading and the dark of night approaching (152). Now, darkness for some may be a positive word, indicating a time of sleep and recovery. For others it may be negative, indicating a sense of fear, unknown, and sadness. The narrator in "The Supper" uses it with a negative connotation, one that evokes a sense of unknown, fear, sadness, and immorality in the horrible treatment of the prisoners. The narrator follows this setting of darkness with

descriptions of heavy wind gusts and cloud movements that seem to cause physical harm. He describes this by saying, “A dark, gusty wind, heavy with the smells of the thawing, sour earth, tossed the clouds about and cut through your body like a blade of ice” (152). World War II was a difficult and tragic time for the world, and perhaps the narrator is attempting to portray this difficulty as a storm sweeping the world into darkness, both visibly and within the souls of the people involved. In other words, the narrator is drawing our attention to the emotional and mental distress many people were experiencing during this time; a distress that was so terrible that it seemed to inflict physical pain.

The location of the narrator is not directly given, although mentions of rails and a highway indicate that it may be somewhere along a railroad. It's probable that the narrator is a prisoner forced by the S.S. to unload the numerous people and objects sent place to place by train, similar to the narrator in the short story written by Borowski, “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.” The narrator proceeds to describe a group of twenty Russians being escorted out of the darkness and down into an embankment, each starved, wrinkled, bloody, and mangled, walking to their death. Their suffering is depicted by, “their naked elbows, pulled back unnaturally and tied with another piece of wire—all this emerged out of the surrounding blackness as if carved in ice” (153). This vivid description provides the reader with the image of the severity and horror the people were experiencing, and the narrator makes darkness very much present. The narrator seems to want the reader to get a sense of how painful and restricted the prisoners are, and how hopeless they feel confined by wire and deprived of food. It makes the reader feel as if the prisoners are trapped in a room without light or a way out. They have no hope of escape and nothing but sadness and darkness around them. The narrator goes on to describe the most authoritative figure's approach to the situation by saying, “The Kommandant,

a greying, sunburned man, who had come from a village especially for the occasion, crossed the lighted area with a tired but firm step, and stopping at the edge of the darkness, decided that the rows of Russians were indeed a proper distance apart” (154). It seems there is a barrier or some kind of separation between the small amount of light the Kommandant is standing in and the darkness that surrounds the Russian prisoners. Given the emphasis of the use of darkness in the text it is clear that the narrator finds this barrier significant. For the narrator, perhaps this barrier is the defining threshold between life and death. The narrator draws our attention to the Kommandant’s actions by saying, “The Kommandant gave a signal and out of the darkness emerged a long line of S.S. men with rifles in their hands. You could no longer tell that they had returned from the labour Kommandos with us...They had time to eat, to change to fresh, gala uniforms, and even to have a manicure” (155). Again, the reader’s attention is drawn the idea of darkness. The S.S. men emerge from darkness into the visible light with their every part visible and healthy. No doubt they will live. The Russian prisoners, on the other hand, remain in the darkness and their features are dull and withered. Death is near for them. It seems the narrator is drawing the reader’s attention to a unique distinction between the S.S. men and the prisoners. Typically, light represents good and darkness represents evil. In this case it appears to be the opposite. The S.S. men are the ones who are present in the light, whereas the Russian prisoners remain in the darkness. Perhaps the narrator makes this distinction to represent the mindset of the two groups. The S.S. men have performed many treacherous acts that they should be the ones in the darkness, but they are in the light, and the Russian prisoners have seemingly done nothing wrong, yet they are in the darkness. The narrator finds this significant in that the rule of a tyrant has swept an evil across the world and inverted right and wrong.

The narrator makes frequent mention that the prisoners are starved. The reader's attention is drawn to the young Camp Elder informing the prisoners that "tonight the entire camp again will go without dinner" (154). The Camp Elder also threatens that, "The Block Elders will carry the soup back to the kitchen and...if even one cup is missing, you'll have to answer to me" (154). The story appears to be expressing a perspective that when people are deprived of naturally human things, such as food, they gravitate toward inhumane methods to accomplish the closest thing to being human again. Here, the narrator makes this evident to stress how inhumanely the prisoners were treated. The S.S. men proceed to shoot the Russian prisoners in the head, splattering brains everywhere, and leaving as fast as they had come. Slowly the remaining people rush forth to the place of the dead corpses, "...swarming over it noisily" (155). The narrator was some distance away and unable to get close but became very much aware of what was going on when someone approached him the following day. The narrator describes the encounter by stating, "...but the following day, when we were again driven out to work, a 'Muslimized' Jew from Estonia who was helping me haul steel bars tried to convince me all day that human brains are, in fact, so tender you can eat them absolutely raw" (156). Inhumane treatment has caused the prisoners to become inhuman and practice immoral acts of cannibalism. The narrator speaks of this to show that the people were so deprived and treated so poorly that even performing an immoral act of cannibalism didn't seem to be wrong to them.

The prisoners remaining were so deprived of food that they plunged into the darkness to feast on humans. It seems the narrator used darkness as a metaphor or representation of immorality. The prisoners who were once human had become so deprived of a simple human need, that they were willing to perform inhumane acts to satisfy that need. This seems to be where the narrator unites the use of darkness to the situation. The S.S. men emerged from

darkness into the light. They appear to be the good guys of the situation, and the Russians appear to be the bad guys. However, the reader knows the opposite is true. This makes it clear that the world seemed to be inverted, in which light became dark and dark became light, and even though the truth was the opposite, the narrator shows that it too became lost in the darkness.

## Works Cited

Borowski, Tadeusz “The Supper” *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Trans.

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